

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

16 November 1987

Tunisia: Prospects for the Ben Ali Regime [REDACTED]

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Summary

President Ben Ali's initial actions bode well for the country's near term stability as he endeavors to accommodate opposition groups. He is opening up the political system stifled by former President Bourguiba, while promising to continue his predecessor's strongly pro-Western foreign policies. Most Tunisians and foreign governments have responded favorably to the takeover. Ben Ali's biggest challenge remains how to handle the Islamic fundamentalists and still maintain the support of the ruling party and Army. He will continue to be wary of Libya, making improved relations conditional upon firm guarantees from Tripoli of non-interference in Tunisian affairs. The President probably also views US security assistance as vital to Tunisia's stability, but he may not be as open publicly as Bourguiba in embracing the United States given the perception among some Tunisians that he has close links to Washington. [REDACTED]

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On 7 November, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, the country's Prime Minister for five weeks, announced that he had removed 84-year-old President Bourguiba from office for reasons of mental health. Ben Ali, an Army General and former Interior Minister

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This memorandum was prepared by [REDACTED] the Maghreb Branch, Arab-Israeli Division, Office of Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, with a contribution from [REDACTED] the Near East-North Africa Branch, Asia-Near East Division, Office of Leadership Analysis. Information as of 13 November 1987 was used in its preparation. Questions and comments should be directed to Chief, Arab-Israeli Division [REDACTED]

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with a reputation for toughness, assumed the Presidency. His term of office extends until 1991, when both the President and members of the National Assembly are required by law to seek a new mandate from voters. [redacted]

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The Constitution allows for Ben Ali's assumption of power upon a determination that the President is "incapacitated." A team of six medical doctors, including some of Bourguiba's personal physicians, rendered the judgment earlier that day. It is true that Bourguiba had grown increasingly feeble in recent years, [redacted]

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[redacted] but in our view, the timing of the takeover probably was linked to Bourguiba's insistence that the leader of the Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) and other fundamentalists sentenced to long prison terms in September be retried and sentenced to death. We believe that such action would have damaged Tunisia's credibility abroad and sparked renewed violence by fundamentalists. [redacted]

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The Domestic Front

There has been no negative reaction to Ben Ali's takeover in Tunisia. We believe most Tunisians breathed a sigh of relief over the non-violent transition of power, given widespread concern about Bourguiba's increasingly erratic behavior. The former President, while being treated with the respect due the country's founder, has been sent to live in a government villa outside the capital. [redacted]

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Ben Ali has taken positive steps to garner support for his government. He has indicated to the media that he will liberalize the political system and the press. The government has stated that it will allow parties full participation in politics. Ben Ali has released the nation's chief labor leader from house arrest and is allowing prominent dissidents in exile to return, including former Prime Minister Mzali. Most of those detained during the takeover, including Bourguiba's son, have been released. The government is considering amnesty for other political prisoners. [redacted]

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In our view, the President's minimal changes in the Cabinet and military indicate continuity in economic policy and support from the officer corps. His reappointment to the Cabinet of Bourguiba's key economic ministers suggests the new government will maintain its structural adjustment economic program under IMF and World Bank auspices. In addition, Ben Ali promoted several senior military officers and appointed an Army general to

[redacted]

be Minister of Interior. We believe these moves are designed to reassure foreign creditors and guarantee stability. [redacted]

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The International Scene

The new government has emphasized that it will maintain Bourguiba's pro-Western foreign policy. A senior Tunisian official has reaffirmed to US diplomats in Tunis the country's traditional friendship with the United States and the regime's desire to forge even closer cooperation. Foreign reaction to the takeover has been uniformly positive, especially from France, the country's principal ally. According to the US Embassy in Paris, French officials are satisfied with the change in Tunis. [redacted]

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Regional reactions also have been supportive of the Ben Ali government. Algerian diplomats have told US officials in Algiers that they had been concerned about the political situation in Tunisia, given the growing political instability of the Bourguiba government. We believe the failure of the Algerian press to mention Bourguiba--except for his health--or his legacy is a clear indication that Algiers accepts the Ben Ali regime. Libyan leader Qadhafi also congratulated Ben Ali. [redacted]

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Outlook

We believe that Ben Ali is taking the right steps to renew public confidence in the government. He probably will continue to move cautiously in dealing with his opponents. His moves will give him the public support over the short term to meet some of the political, economic, and social needs of the country. We believe it is unlikely that Bourguiba or his supporters will launch an immediate challenge to Ben Ali. In our view, even if they did, it would have a dim chance of success. [redacted]

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For its part, the MTI approved of the takeover, and along with other opposition groups is pressing for political freedoms. Ben Ali has decided to postpone further trials of fundamentalists in order to avoid any protests against his government, and his ministers have hinted that those in jail who did not commit serious crimes may be released in a year. [redacted]

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Given Ben Ali's hardline stance toward the fundamentalists in the past as the nation's security chief, however, we doubt he will give in to the MTI's basic demand to become a political party. Indeed, the new foreign minister has stated that the crackdown against the fundamentalists will continue -- probably

[redacted]

referring to their violence. Nevertheless, Ben Ali must find means other than repression to deal with them because they represent the greatest threat to the regime. For example, he probably will end government prohibitions against Islamic dress and other apolitical manifestations of Islam. [redacted]

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A problem of lesser magnitude for Ben Ali is maintaining the support of the ruling Destourian Socialist Party (PSD) and the Army. Bourguiba's PSD has ruled the country since independence 31 years ago, and its leaders will be concerned that new freedoms for the opposition would weaken their positions of power. [redacted]

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We also believe Ben Ali will be wary of Libya. Nevertheless, the President probably will continue to improve relations with Triopli and eventually seek a resumption of diplomatic ties. We doubt, however, that he will succumb to pressure from Algeria to allow Libya to become a member of the treaty linking Tunisia with Algeria and Mauritania unless Qadhafi offers firm guarantees of non-interference, possibly including the cessation of Libyan refuge for Tunisian dissidents. [redacted]

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Implications for the United States

Ben Ali almost certainly views security and economic aid from the West, including the United States, as crucial to the stability of Tunisia and the legitimacy of his regime. Like Bourguiba, he probably regards US assistance as vital to deter possible Libyan subversion. [redacted]

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